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## “It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons”: Oscar Wilde’s Path towards Civic Engagement in his (Post-)Prison Years

*Abstract:* As suggested by the thought-provoking statement “It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons”, a quotation from Oscar Wilde’s letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of 27 May 1897, this paper deals with a relatively less investigated chapter of the author’s life. Here, the focus shifts away from such *topoi* as the Irish dandy’s brilliant rhetoric and aphoristic wit, or the magnetic aura of the Professor of Aesthetics and man of the theatre. Emphasis is placed instead on the human profile of an artist who, in the wake of his condemnation for ‘acts of gross indecency’, was to come to grips with two harrowing years of imprisonment with hard labour. Light will be shed on various issues as well as medico-scientific, sociocultural and political contexts, ranging from the notions of ‘Decadence’, ‘regression’ or ‘degeneration’ to the penitentiary regime in late nineteenth-century England. Particular attention will be paid to Wilde’s trials, conviction and prison writings – their content, structure, reception – and to an awareness-raising campaign through which he set out to expose the physical and psychological punishments that were routinely inflicted on inmates, including children. From the Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary (2 July 1896) to the two letters to the *Daily Chronicle* (1897 and 23 March 1898), we will see how the disengaged artist’s stance left room for a deep sense of moral and civic commitment.

*Keywords:* Oscar Wilde. British penal system. Prison experience. Writings. Civic engagement.

1. A public figure like Oscar Wilde would readily open up avenues of enquiry strictly connected to the topic of this journal’s special issue. Indeed, a whole set of aesthetic scenarios and revolutions characterising the British *fin de siècle* might well see Wilde at its centre: from the theme and implications of the ‘religion of art’ – or ‘aesthetic uselessness’, in an anti-philistine sense – to a poignant re-evaluation of ancient Greek and Roman myths, from the philosophy of *otium* and a hypostatisation of the dandy/*flâneur* to a fascination with the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, to say nothing of the intense transnational dialogue with various artistic currents and styles (e.g. Symbolism, Impressionism, Japonisme, Art Nouveau). Wilde’s writings gave full play to an eclectic phenomenology that enhanced classical inheritance as well as synaesthetic analogies, a taste for hedonism and luxurious excess, the seductive lure of the pagan/exotic and an obsession with sensuality, artifice and masks. They wove together the strands of modish world weariness and *blasé* attitudes, cynicism and sensation-hungry rambling, corruption and martyrdom, beauty and monstrosity, a cult of personality and a deep-seated fear of disintegration. In short, to varying degrees did Wilde epitomise the phase of Aestheticism and Decadence in Britain and Europe at large, encompassing

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the far-reaching reverberations of the ‘Art for Art’s sake’ maxim, the divorce from prescriptive moral codes and an ultimate insurgence of disquietude and angst.

But there is more to this – and to the notion of Decadence, for that matter, as critics have been stressing for some three decades now. To quote just a couple of comments, Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen open their volume’s introduction by reminding us that the “social, scientific, and industrial revolutions of the later nineteenth century brought with them a ferment of *new* artistic visions”,<sup>1</sup> while Jane Desmarais and David Weir point out that, no longer “just a term of opprobrium for mannered art or immoral behaviour, decadence today describes complex cultural and social responses to *modernity* in all its forms [...] decadence has emerged as a way of taking cultural stock of *major social changes*”.<sup>2</sup> In a previous study, Weir argued that ‘decadence’ is “a simple word but a complicated concept” and that decay

is oddly generative: the historical decline of Rome ultimately seems less like decadence and more like progress because of the many social and cultural developments that ensued in the wake of both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. Rome not only remains the paradigm of decadence, it also provides the pattern for the inevitable linkage of decline and renewal. But this pattern becomes a paradox in the modern era: historical decline and renewal, social decay and regeneration, artistic decadence and avant-gardism appear increasingly interrelated.<sup>3</sup>

As this paper aims to show, such a paradoxical wavering between dejection and reactivity, surrender and agency, could similarly be traced in Wilde, with specific reference – in our case – to the period of his tragic downfall, that is, his being charged with ‘acts of gross indecency’ with another male person, a conviction followed by two years’ imprisonment with hard labour (1895-1897). While clearly a phase of excruciating ordeal in which he fell prey to suicidal impulses and risked being plunged into insanity, that traumatic turning point in his life also brought about a piercing new awareness, a changed perspective and a search for recovery. It might be argued that Wilde wielded his own golden bough while in the hellish underworld of the prison, a magic branch that taught him never to be oblivious to feelings of fellowship, solidarity, forgiveness and compassion for the human condition, especially when it came to the most unfortunate and destitute. In a compelling insight from *De Profundis* – the letter to Lord Alfred Douglas of January-March 1897, whose prodromes probably reached back to September 1896 and which amounted to an apology, a spiritual autobiography and a touching example of prison writing originally entitled *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*<sup>4</sup> – Wilde juxtaposed moments of bitterness and self-blame with musings on desolation and humility as “the starting-point for a fresh development”, for “a new life,

<sup>1</sup> M. HÄRMÄNMAA and C. NISSEN, “Introduction: The Empire at the End of Decadence”, in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> J. DESMARAIS and D. WEIR (eds), *Decadence and Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2019, p. i (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> D. WEIR, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>4</sup> On the epistle’s discursive structure and transgeneric layering, see R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis* as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography”, *Criticism*, 26 (4), 1984, pp. 335-54, and I. SMALL, “Love-Letter, Spiritual Autobiography, or Prison Writing? Identity and Value in *De Profundis*”, in J. BRISTOW (ed.), *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003, pp. 86-100.

a *Vita Nuova*” wherein to seek “a fresh mode of self-realisation”.<sup>5</sup> Quite tellingly, by picking up on Dante’s poetic and allegorical imagery, Wilde firmly distanced himself from the *accidiosi*, a miserable congregation affected by sloth and placed low in the *Inferno*. As opposed to this kind of paralysis, he wanted to both get to grips with “all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without complaint, fear, or reluctance” and “learn how to be cheerful and happy” with “a real desire to live”,<sup>6</sup> although never pretending to sweep that gruesome experience away with a clean slate. In other words, he endeavoured to tone down rupture and reinforce a sense of connectedness and acceptance while working through sorrow, because

[t]his new life, as through my love of Dante I like sometimes to call it, is, of course, no new life at all, but simply the continuance, by means of development, and evolution, of my former life [...]. My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sun-gilt side of the garden, and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom [...] I went down the primrose path to the sound of flutes. I lived on honeycomb. But to have continued the same life would have been wrong because it would have been limiting. I had to pass on. The other half of the garden had its secrets for me also.<sup>7</sup>

Crossing the threshold into the other, gloomier “half of the garden” is cast as an initiation rite, a fundamental step towards achieving a new status of maturity and spiritual development. As Wilde hastens to underscore, the idea of suffering as a constituent part of one’s existence had been foreshadowed in a number of his works, with the physical and mental hardships of detention and life-space constriction having now supervened to dramatically magnify the effects of that pain. At the same time, he sounds adamant when dissociating himself from the pitfall of solipsism and attributing a momentous significance to the postulate of the common bond of humanity, a kinship one could honour through forms of sympathetic imagination and identification.

In 1897, by which time he had almost served his prison sentence, Wilde’s sense of moral engagement was therefore anything but latent. Needless to say, the unfolding of this parable of awakening, empathic sharing and receptivity would lend itself to an alignment with the interpretative categories of Trauma Studies, especially the nuanced, pluralistic and transdisciplinary model that has come into vogue in recent years. Generated by a shocking and disruptive event, Wilde’s psychological wound called for a healing process of assessment through recollection and a therapeutic ‘assimilation’ of that laceration into a fully fledged individual identity. In spite of harsh social stigmatisation, he understood that self-censure and concealment behind a bulwark of forgetfulness, repression and the ‘unsayable’ would have been a much worse option than attempting to master the damage via memory retrieval, comprehension and meaning-construction.

<sup>5</sup> O. WILDE, *De Profundis*, in ID., *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. N. FRANKEL, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard U.P., (1897) 2018, p. 171. The textual version of *De Profundis* appearing in the collection edited by Frankel corresponds to the original prison manuscript, which has been housed in the British Library since 1909 and has more recently been reproduced in a volume with Merlin Holland’s introduction (see *De Profundis: A Facsimile*, London, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> O. WILDE, *De Profundis*, pp. 175-77, 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 191-95.

To put it differently, Wilde recognised “how past violence leaves marks on the present and future, how the past haunts us and how past injustice needs to be remembered and worked through so that we can avoid repeating it”.<sup>8</sup> He had his own urgent story to tell, to be verbally transposed and narrativised. Importantly, as we will see in the remainder of this article, the hurtful traces engraved on his mind were to raise the issue of institutional and collective responsibility, exceeding the boundaries of the sensational court case and transforming his psychic burden into a springboard for agency. Formerly confined to the walls of his stuffy cell, his utterances eventually departed from the scripts of spiritual autobiography and the confessional/dramatic monologue to set the pattern for a scathing testimonial contribution against structural violence and “wrong and unjust laws [...] a wrong and unjust system”.<sup>9</sup> As a logical corollary to this, the moral involvement of Wilde the ‘notorious internee’ would join ranks with the civic commitment of Wilde the ‘eminent survivor’ intent on bearing witness to the adversities and tribulations of prison life. As I have remarked elsewhere, a salient intermingling emerges at this juncture between “prison writing and writing about imprisonment”, two approaches capable of throwing light on Wilde as a historical subject grappling with “a profound sense of shock, devastation and psychological harassment” and facing up to “the criminal justice system that was in force in England at the time”.<sup>10</sup>

When looking at present-day Wilde scholarship, one notices that some critics have started to make a foray into this topic, mostly concentrating on *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), the poem Wilde wrote while in exile in northern France, taking a forcible cue from the execution by hanging, in 1896, of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a Royal Horse Guards’ ex-trooper who had murdered his wife. With reference to *De Profundis*, Christian Gerzso contends that the letter discloses a substantial space of re-conceptualisation allowing Wilde to “rewrite the story of his downfall and, in the process, recast his aestheticist philosophy”.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, the author not only integrated elements like suffering and pain, but also “incorporated notions of effort and work into an aestheticism that had famously celebrated indolence”.<sup>12</sup> Wilde took cognisance of the value of intellectual and aesthetic productivity as opposed to idleness and, crucially, the regime of *useless* physical labour that prison authorities imposed on inmates in accordance with an inflexible policy of retribution, crime deterrence and soul-crushing chastisement. In sum, besides constituting an “act of resistance against insanity and against the material matrix of prison space and time”,<sup>13</sup> *De Profundis* can be said to foreground Wilde’s efforts to reclaim a degree of purpose and agency in defiance of apathy, blind acquiescence and despondency.

<sup>8</sup> C. DAVIS and H. MERETOJA, “Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies”, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> O. WILDE, *De Profundis*, p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> L. GIOVANNELLI, “Oscar Wilde and Prison Experience”, *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, 35 (2), 2022, pp. 21, 24.

<sup>11</sup> C. GERZSO, “No Useless Labour: Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* and the Importance of Intellectual Work”, *Textual Practice*, 33 (6), 2019, p. 1026.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1027.

<sup>13</sup> R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis* as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography”, p. 335.

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* has not eluded attention either, on account of its feelings of empathy and allegorical identification with the crowd of ‘souls in pain’ – mankind and its inherited inclination to sinfulness – doomed to ‘kill the thing they love’ and to wistfully linger in a pit of shame, or vale of tears, until their last day on earth. Brett Beasley meditates on Wilde’s drawing on traditional ballad forms (e.g. the popular gallows ballad subgenre) and direct, brutal experience as a way to reach a level of “humility of style and subject matter”.<sup>14</sup> This humility, however, is not incompatible with richness in imaginative possibilities and ethical/social implications. Indeed, Wilde’s poem stands out as “a ballad of the prison itself since our focus is drawn not to any particular outlaw personality but to the entire penal system”.<sup>15</sup> Here, the real threat is not to be found in the convicts themselves but in a callous jurisdiction that forestalls the “mercy and redemption represented by nature and by Christ”.<sup>16</sup> The nefarious regulations of a secularised system go so far as to withstand God’s eternal Laws, including the cleansing power of Christ’s Passion and Divine Mercy. In order to disrupt this twisted logic, the collective ‘I’ in the text struggles to recognise the detainees’ fellow feeling as well as the moral weight of suffering, contrition and expiation.

Even more to the point, Mona Salah El-Din Hassanein offers an appraisal of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* within the framework of literary Trauma Theory (particularly through the lens of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra) and reads it as a parable whereby Wilde “manages to transcend the victim status and assumes the role of ethical agent to voice a critique of the Victorian penal system and the standards of morality underlying the cruelties practiced against wrong doers and to solicit social action”.<sup>17</sup> This conversion might be described in terms of a “survivor mission”: the mission of a famous and subsequently disgraced *fin-de-siècle* celebrity who had to wrestle with his own “prison trauma and the indirect traumatization he experienced as a result of witnessing the execution of a fellow prisoner whose story forms the narrative base of the poem”.<sup>18</sup> Rising above haunting personal experience and listening to the others’ suffering, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* elicited a deep emotional/cognitive response among readers by simultaneously speaking out against the barbaric treatment of prisoners and portraying prison itself as a trauma-catalyst ambience.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> B. BEASLEY, “Oscar Wilde’s Humility: A Reassessment of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*”, *Renascence*, 69 (4), 2017, p. 254.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 264.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 268.

<sup>17</sup> M.S. EL-DIN HASSANEIN, “From Victim to Ethical Agent: Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as Post-traumatic Writing”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11 (9), 2017, p. 2287.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*. El-Din Hassanein highlights the extent to which the “confrontational aspect of post-traumatic writing is reflected in *The Ballad*: Wilde illuminates readers to help them see the penal system in a new light; he urges them to take the side of the prisoners who suffer the humiliation and brutality of the prison regime [...]. Characterizing the prisoners as ‘souls’ foregrounds the spiritual part of their personalities that is capable of redemption from the power of sin through divine grace. Unlike the unyielding human law, divine forgiveness will not disfavor sinners, and repentant souls are accepted by God” (*ibidem*, p. 2295).

<sup>19</sup> In tune with this, and adopting a Levinasian perspective, Mojtaba Jekhouni thus outlines Wilde’s route of ‘ethical becoming’ and concern for the other: “Wilde affirms that loss of enthusiasm for life goes hand in hand, paradoxically, with an unbending optimism that could lend the melancholy impulse a new lease of life. Suffering

These preliminary considerations already strengthen the case for approaching Wilde in light of today's debates on nineteenth-century Decadence as a complex phenomenon hovering on the brink between decline and renewal, a low-spirited sense of an ending and pivotal epistemic shifts. To gloss this first part of the article with a final quotation, it might be added that, via his denunciation of the authoritarian aloofness and self-righteous rigour of late-Victorian penal policy, Wilde went on to develop "a critique of modern bureaucracy which anticipated in some respects the work of influential twentieth century commentators such as Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman", giving voice to "a number of observations which were *ahead of their time*".<sup>20</sup>

2. Before following this trajectory and focusing on Wilde's two campaigning letters to the *Daily Chronicle* (1897-1898), in which he lifted the veil on the stark brutalities of the penitentiary regime, we should however take a look at the other, macroscopic side of the historical coin. It would in fact be deceptive to simply brush aside decadent *topoi* such as those of decline, reversion, malaise, or degeneration. Moreover, the crepuscular framework hinging on the *fin de siècle/fin du globe* dyad proves instrumental in contextualising another document penned by Wilde on the subject of prison hardships: the "Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary", dated 2 July 1896 and actually the first piece of writing that will be examined here.

It is by now commonplace to observe that, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, a condition of cultural ferment and iconoclastic reaction to a bourgeois establishment was inextricably bound up with feelings of anxiety, pessimism, and *taedium vitae*. People seemed to be affected by an existential distress and symptoms of psychic disorders leading to nervousness and sickness. All this appeared to be exponentially gaining ground from the individual sphere into the collective realm, so that notions of social corruptness, atavism and involution started to hold currency. Absolute faith in progress and in a rational order was called into question in various fields, from the philosophical to the socio-anthropological one, from Darwinian postulates and medical studies to sexology and the positivist school of criminology, which assigned a (pseudo)scientific status to the anatomical traits and physiognomy of 'moral degenerates' and 'congenital/atavistic criminals'.

Although a major focus on these issues is beyond the scope of the present article, it is worth recalling that what might be subsumed under the umbrella terms of 'degeneracy' (a pathological deviation from normative and moral standards, or a constitutional propensity for it) and biological 'regression' (a lower-state throwback, or a form of arrested development) was part and parcel of a nineteenth-century paradigm associated with a diversified body of inquiries that shaped medico-sociological discourse and

can give meaning to an ethical way of being and should not overflow into despair. Significantly enough, it is now an inspiration by sorrow, and not pleasure, that triggers Wilde's most sincere humanity, out of which the seeds of a new art germinate [...]. In shifting the center from Being toward Otherness, he starts to give priority to the transcendence of the other over the imperialism of the ego" (M. JEIHOUNI, "Oscar Wilde and Call of the Other in *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*", *The Explicator*, 74 [1], 2016, pp. 48-49).

<sup>20</sup> M. HOUSDEN, "Oscar Wilde's Imprisonment and an Early Idea of 'Banal Evil'", *Forum Historiae Iuris*, 25, 2006, p. 5 (emphasis added), <https://forhistiur.net/2006-10-housden/abstract/?l=en> (last accessed on 22 July 2023).

paved the way for Cesare Lombroso’s and Max Nordau’s well-known theorisations.<sup>21</sup> Debates involving the tenets of degenerationists and criminal anthropology soon crossed over the line into the social milieu, curtailing Victorian confidence and stirring up geopolitical fears about the impending fall of western civilisation. Or rather, about the decline of a British Empire that risked taking a downward slide to earlier evolutionary stages, reverse-colonisation dynamics, and ultimate disintegration. It is therefore no wonder that, in a perspective of racial determinism and imminent deterioration, being faced with a spectrum of ‘deviant types’ exhibiting anomalies and atavistic alterations was fraught with sinister overtones.

Among the most caustic interpreters of this retroactive ‘wave of barbarism’ and alleged resurgence of primal as well as flawed instincts was the social critic Max Nordau (1849-1923), whose major and controversial contribution remains *Entartung* (1892), a bulky exposé which made a sensation at the time and was translated into English as *Degeneration* in 1895, running through no less than five editions. Although the credibility and scientific pretensions of this literary-sociological investigation have long been tarnished, *Degeneration* purported to objectively assess a network of artistic and literary works and cultural trends circulating in Europe at the turn of the century. By transferring Lombroso’s clinical pictures of criminals and Bénédict Augustin Morel’s “degeneration theory from the insane asylum to the literary avant-garde of the fin de siècle” and “applying the psychiatric concept of degeneration to modern culture”, Nordau’s trenchant attack wanted to show that “the cultural avant-garde, far from being modern and progressive, was actually atavistic and regressive”.<sup>22</sup> Behaving like an earnest diagnostician and therapist, Nordau scrutinised a contemporary “dusk of the nations”<sup>23</sup> and pointed the finger at a cluster of writers, artists and thinkers he classified as sick, insane or perverted: as discreditable members of an effete, degenerate race that had to be contained before it led to total ruin. By creating a palimpsest of interlocking links between psychiatric case studies and the psychophysiological ‘unhealthiness’ of the representatives of Decadence, Nordau granted the ruling classes an opportunity to exorcise their fear of anarchism, solipsism and different kinds of threatening aberrations.

In brief, *Entartung* provided an etiological model according to which end-of-the-century Europe was suffering from a collective sociopathology oscillating between

<sup>21</sup> As Elisa Segnini fitly sums up: “Before the advent of evolutionary biology, Bénédict Morel (1809-1873), author of the influential *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine* [*Treatise on Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Degeneration of the Human Species*] (1857), had defined degeneration as a pathological deviation from the norm, a state that could be inherited and that was discernible through physical signs. In *Degeneration, a Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), the biologist Edwin Ray Lankester (1847-1929) combined Morel’s notion of degeneracy with Ernst Haeckel’s recapitulation theory. Extending the logic of evolution to the social sphere, he argued that degeneration was the response of adaptation to a less challenging environment: just as a lack of stimulation could lead an organism to an inverted development, the lack of challenge in contemporary European society would cause its atrophy” (E. SEGNINI, *Fragments, Genius and Madness: Masks and Mask-Making in the Fin-de-Siècle Imagination*, Cambridge, Legenda, 2021, p. 2).

<sup>22</sup> H.-P. SÖDER, “Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as a Critic of Fin-de-Siècle Modernism”, *German Studies Review*, 14 (3), 1991, p. 475.

<sup>23</sup> M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, Engl. trans. from the second edition of the German work, London, William Heinemann, (1892) 1920, p. 1.

degeneration and hysteria, a feverish restlessness and feebleness of will. The evidence gathered by Nordau concerned famous names, movements, and currents of that period, from John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites to the French Parnassians and Symbolists and, of course, the affiliates of Aestheticism. Indeed, he did not spare the ‘mystics’ Richard Wagner, D.G. Rossetti and Paul Verlaine, the ‘hysterical’ Joris-Karl Huysmans, the ‘egomaniacs’ Henrik Ibsen and Friedrich Nietzsche, or the false realism and morbid pessimism of Émile Zola. In the book’s dedicatory preface – a warmy homage to his spiritual father, ‘Professor Cæsar Lombroso’ – Nordau vigorously asserted:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.

Some among these degenerates in literature, music, and painting have in recent years come into extraordinary prominence, and are revered by numerous admirers as creators of a new art, and heralds of the coming centuries [...]. If they are absurd and anti-social, they exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation.<sup>24</sup>

By means of his anathema, Nordau projected the reader into a bleak scenario populated by artists and intellectuals ostensibly impaired by psychic and/or somatic stigmata, exhaustion and a weak intellect, metaphysical and erotic fixations. Yet, if he thought that degenerates whose “mental derangement is too deep-seated [...] must be abandoned to their inexorable fate”<sup>25</sup> because they are past cure or amelioration, he also offered a glimmer of hope by maintaining, in the closing section of the volume (“Therapeutics”), that the very principle of the survival of the fittest would help restore an ethics of rationality, responsibility, modesty, and restraint.

Regarding Oscar Wilde, his name was bound to loom large in Nordau’s ‘clique of unrecoverables’. A number of pages is in fact dedicated to him in Chapter 3 (“Decadents and Æsthetes”) of Book III (“Ego-mania”). Here follows a significant excerpt:

The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement, its megalomaniacal contempt for men and its exaggeration of the importance of art, have found their English representative among the ‘Æsthetes,’ the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde [...] Wilde dresses in queer costumes which recall partly the fashions of the Middle Ages, partly the rococo modes. He pretends to have abandoned the dress of the present time because it offends his sense of the beautiful; but this is only a pretext in which probably he himself does not believe. What really determines his actions is the hysterical craving to be noticed, to occupy the attention of the world with himself, to get talked about [...] it is above all a sign of anti-social ego-mania to irritate the majority unnecessarily, only to gratify vanity, or an aesthetical instinct of small importance and easy to control [...] When, therefore, an Oscar Wilde goes about in ‘aesthetic costume’ among gazing Philistines, exciting either their ridicule or their wrath, it is no indication of independence of character, but rather from a purely anti-socialistic, ego-maniacal recklessness and hysterical longing

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 551.

to make a sensation, justified by no exalted aim; nor is it from a strong desire for beauty, but from a malevolent mania for contradiction.<sup>26</sup>

First published in German in 1892, *Entartung* could not have pursued the line of Wilde’s criminalisation and of the trials lying ahead. This is why it did not so much expand on the topic of ‘erotomania’ – an obsession Wilde would instead refer to in his 1896 petition, while in the depths of despair – as capitalise on an inventory of megalomaniacal idiosyncrasies, including a proclivity for eccentric posturing (“buffoon mummery”) and a capricious wit (“tortuously disdainful prattling”).<sup>27</sup>

Be that as it may, in July 1896, when he was serving his sentence in Reading Gaol and disgrace had clung to his name since the spring of the previous year, Wilde was induced to look backwards and boost his chance of getting a pardon by depicting himself as a *bête noire* along the lines of *Entartung* (which he probably read in its first French translation). He also openly based his self-diagnosis on the theses of Lombroso and Nordau:

The petition of the above-named prisoner humbly sheweth that he does not desire to attempt to palliate in any way the terrible offences of which he was rightly found guilty, but to point out that such offences are forms of sexual madness and are recognised as such not merely by modern pathological science but by much modern legislation, notably in France, Austria, and Italy, where the laws affecting these misdemeanors have been repealed, on the ground that they are diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge. In the works of eminent men of science such as Lombroso and Nordau, to take merely two instances out of many, this is specially insisted on with reference to the intimate connection between madness and the literary and artistic temperament, Professor Nordau in his book on “Degenerescence” published in 1894 having devoted an entire chapter to the petitioner as a specially typical example of this fatal law. The petitioner is now keenly conscious of the fact that while the three years preceding his arrest were from the intellectual point of view the most brilliant years of his life [...] during the entire time he was suffering from the most horrible form of erotomania, which made him forget his wife and children, his high social position in London and Paris, his European distinction as an artist, the honour of his name and family, his very humanity itself, and left him the helpless prey of the most revolting passions, and of a gang of people who for their own profit ministered to them, and then drove him to his hideous ruin.<sup>28</sup>

In his anguished petition to Sir Matthew White Ridley, first Viscount Ridley, a document which would unfortunately grant him no remission,<sup>29</sup> Wilde clarified his

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 317-19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 319, 320.

<sup>28</sup> O. WILDE, “Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary”, 2 July 1896, in *Id.*, *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 41, 43.

<sup>29</sup> As Nicholas Frankel explains in his illuminating and carefully detailed commentary on Wilde’s prison writings: “Victorian prisoners were entitled to appeal to the home secretary, and remission of part of a prisoner’s sentence for good behavior was an accepted element of the late-Victorian penal code [...]. However, the chairman of the Prison Commission told Frank Harris that Wilde couldn’t possibly be granted a remission since ‘good conduct meant, in prison parlance, absence of punishment, and Oscar had been punished pretty often. Of course, his offences were minor offences’”. However, “Wilde’s petition would not have succeeded even had his behavior been perfect. Before 1898 remissions were granted only to prisoners serving sentences of more than two years in one of the large government-run convict prisons, whereas ‘people sentenced to imprisonment in a local prison ... did not have the inducement and advantage of a remission in sentence’” (N. FRANKEL, Note to O. WILDE, “Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary”, p. 40).

reasons for pleading by casting himself as the victim of a decadent disease that was gnawing at the soul of quite a few talented artists of the age. On the one hand, he drew attention to his poor physical condition, mentioning a failing eyesight – due to the gas-jet flaring at night in the whitewashed cell and the bright daylight's hurtful impact on his optic nerve during yard time – and the abscess in his right ear, which had caused a serious infection and a perforation of the drum, this being in fact the injury that would hasten his death from meningoencephalitis in November 1900. On the other hand, he put the accent on the already mentioned erotomania, a delusional disorder Nordau had conceived in terms of a 'sexual madness' or 'sensual monomania', and to which Wilde appealed as a catchword to provide a rationale for his collapse from the peak of success and the deplorable alienation from his family and friends.

To be sure, there was at least another seminal text Wilde must have had in mind when writing his petition, i.e. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis: eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (1886; first English translation 1892), where the postulated abnormal behaviour had been tagged as 'sexual perversion'. Within the sphere of medico-scientific investigation pioneered in the nineteenth century, sexology had been gathering impetus thanks to the work of physicians, psychologists and neurologists such as Heinrich Kaan, Albert Moll, Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, and Krafft-Ebing himself. Via his 1886 encyclopaedic treatise, this German psychiatrist supplied a professional community with a focal clinical-forensic sourcebook, expanded through a dozen integrated editions and ultimately recording over two hundred case histories of psychopathological or obsessive sexual behaviour. Among other codifications, 'homosexuality' was one of the words employed by Krafft-Ebing in order to clearly distinguish it from a normalcy paradigm of sexual orientation thought of as exempt from 'dysfunctions' and 'deviations' and basically geared toward procreation. In his view – which he would tone down and amend over the course of time, though – the homosexual subject was suffering from an innate biological anomaly, an 'inverted sensibility' originating in the embryonic and fetal gestation stages. On account of this, homosexuality was not to be dealt with as, say, an acquired misconduct, a sinful or criminal behaviour, but ministered to by healthcare specialists as a psychoneuropathic illness and inborn deviance. A psychiatrist as well as forensic expert addressing himself to a circle of medical practitioners, lawyers and judges, Krafft-Ebing argued that 'sex offenders' ought not to be legally prosecuted but treated as patients. Importantly, his non-judgmental stance looked ahead to the earliest movements bent on removing laws against homosexuality in Germany.

With rhetorical intelligence, Wilde hastened to take up this subject in the opening paragraph of his petition, where he underscored how his 'pathology' called for a proper cure and demanded a rethinking of the penal code, as attested by the fact that such laws had been repealed in France (1791), Austria (1852), and Italy (1889). If this search for atonement and the seemingly absolute trust in medico-legal authorities followed the lead of a peroration inspired by the pragmatic principle of *docere, probare et movere* (and a few targeted instructions by Frank Harris),<sup>30</sup> and if Wilde was to

<sup>30</sup> On Frank Harris's interview with the chairman of the Prison Commission and following visit to Wilde at

court again Uranian love and boy-worship after his release, the content and style of the Clemency Petition give us a taste of the author’s high degree of awareness and ethical-emotional involvement. However, as we keep on reading, what is compellingly brought home to us is neither Wilde’s legal knowledge, nor his acquaintance with theories about sexual madness. Being pushed to the fore is an overwhelming fear that punctuates his reflections like an eerie *leitmotif*: a sheer terror of an insanity going well beyond the confines of erotomania. As Nicholas Frankel observes, during the first nine months of Wilde’s stay in Reading Prison, “there was no letup in the intensity of his punishment. He remained in solitary confinement, unable to associate with fellow prisoners, picking oakum in his tiny cell for hours on end”.<sup>31</sup>

In all likelihood the only privileged, upper-middle class and university-educated person in the institution, he was crippled even more by its poor sanitary conditions and hard-and-fast rules, an environment which was light years away from his former lifestyle and contacts. Wilde was here an exceptional case, a helpless black swan whose life was literally at risk. Since 20 November 1895 – the day he was transferred to Reading after two months spent in Wandsworth Prison’s infirmary, owing to insomnia, dysentery and the fall which had damaged his right ear – he had had the chance to break the enforced silence and communicate with the outside world only to receive grim news, as when, on 19 February 1896, his wife Constance travelled from Italy to tell him that his mother, Lady Wilde, had passed away about two weeks before. Bereft of both his name (replaced by cell number C.3.3.) and writing materials, allowed only two books per week (by special permission and often the same volumes, given the prison library’s scant collection), cut off from “all human and humane influences”, Wilde felt “deprived of everything that could soothe, distract, or heal a wounded and shaken mind”, not least the gift of “literature to one to whom Literature was once the first thing of life”.<sup>32</sup> Hence his “fear of absolute and entire insanity” and the hope for a remission that might see him “go forth while he [had] still some sanity left”.<sup>33</sup> From the heartrending tones of this peroration it was only a small step to a more militant, factual perspective finding fault with an institutionalised system of sickening and crushing privation, as suggested by the following aside:

Dreadful as are the results of the prison system – a system so terrible that it hardens their hearts whose hearts it does not break, and brutalises those who have to carry it out no less than those who have to submit to it – yet at least amongst its aims is not the desire to wreck the human reason.<sup>34</sup>

3. As a functional preamble to further commentary on Wilde’s incarceration experience, let us briefly recapitulate the climactic moments of his ostracisation and conviction. As is widely known, the wick that triggered the *débâcle* was ignited in February 1895 by the father of Lord Alfred ‘Bosie’ Douglas, i.e. John Sholto Douglas, the

Reading on 16 June 1896, see N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, London, Reaktion Books, 2021, pp. 220-21.

<sup>31</sup> N. FRANKEL, “Introduction”, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> O. WILDE, “Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary”, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 47, 49.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensberry, who left an offensive visiting card addressed to his youngest son's lover at the Albemarle Club in Piccadilly. In this calling card he had hastily scrawled "For Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite" [*sic*]. As a counter-response (and partly at the instigation of Alfred), Wilde decided to sue the marquess for criminal libel and secure a warrant for his arrest, underestimating the ill-tempered aristocrat's resourcefulness and the implications of such a course of action, which would actually prove disastrous for the author as an advocate (and practitioner) of a then forbidden same-sex love. Indeed, by "initiating his libel action against Queensberry, Wilde willingly exposed his life and work to the law's scrutiny",<sup>35</sup> so much so that his attorney, Sir Edward Clarke, advised him to withdraw the suit, secretly expecting his client would flee the country and look for a safe place in France. This, however, did not happen. Wilde refused to debase himself to the level of a deserter and, somewhat too rashly and confidently, opted for holding his ground. He thus got enmeshed not only in a failed libel action, but in a clamorous turning of the tables whereby he would find himself a defendant against the Crown, to be finally convicted on seven counts of gross indecency.<sup>36</sup>

The evidence collected by Queensberry's private detectives and a copy of the witnesses' statements relating to Wilde's intimate associations with a dozen young males from 1892 to 1893 – mostly boys from the urban underclass embroiled in homosexual and/or blackmailing networks – were passed on to the Director of Public Prosecutions and, on the evening of 5 April 1895, the author was arrested at London's Cadogan Hotel, where Douglas had booked a room. The rest is history: what followed were two criminal trials and a verdict of guilty. The sentence, amounting to two years with hard labour in solitary confinement, was the maximum permissible by law. According to Mr Justice Alfred Wills, who pronounced the verdict, the punishment should have been even more exacting, since people like Alfred Taylor (a thirty-three-year-old man gone bankrupt and a promiscuous procurer of boys) and Wilde himself

must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. That you, Taylor, kept a kind of male brothel it is impossible to doubt. And that you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men, it is equally impossible to doubt.

I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this. The sentence of the Court is that each of you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years.<sup>37</sup>

The law prescribing the penalty referred to by Justice Wills was Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which added the offence of gross indecency to the statute book with the purpose of broadening the spectrum of actionable sexual

<sup>35</sup> N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 213.

<sup>36</sup> As Merlin Holland remarks, "[t]o be fair to the lawyers, Oscar had lied to his solicitor and also to Sir Edward Clarke, the Queen's Counsel who was to represent him in court, saying that Queensberry's allegations were groundless, but the more serious interpretation of the libel may well have prompted Queensberry's legal team to look more closely at Wilde's private life than they would have done otherwise" (M. HOLLAND, "Oscar Wilde's Crime and Punishment: Fictions, Facts and Questions", in K. POWELL and P. RABY [eds], *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, p. 201).

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, London, Penguin, (1987) 1988, pp. 448-49.

misconducts and deviances. If, in compliance with the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, sodomy (or ‘crime of buggery’, a felony) could be punished with penal servitude for life or a term of at least ten years, gross indecency concerned other, less ‘reprehensible’ kinds of intimate (homoerotic) relationships between men. These intercourses fell into a fuzzy category labelled ‘Outrages on decency’, without any further definition and with such misdemeanours taking in various parties and degrees of accountability, from, virtually, the exploitation of minors to consenting adults in private. The clause stated that

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.<sup>38</sup>

Commonly known as ‘Labouchere Amendment’ – from Henry Du Pré Labouchère (1831-1912), the liberal-radical MP responsible for this eleventh-hour addition to the Bill resulting in an all-out criminalisation of male homosexual liaisons – Section 11 had been wryly nicknamed the ‘Blackmailer’s Charter’, due to its fomenting secrecy and fear and implicitly facilitating extortion by abusers who might threaten to report suspect gay men to the police.

Rivers of ink have been poured with reference to the public quagmire and myriad of circumstantial factors that had turned so heavy-handedly against Wilde. Much has been said about the energies mobilised to secure his conviction, as though he had been singled out by the establishment for retribution, along a trajectory that pigeonholed him as a degenerate transgressor while ultimately converting him into a sacrificial-victim icon. Across the years, Wilde had certainly emerged as a divisive figure and mordant provocateur, both in the field of sexual behaviour and in light of his anti-authoritarian and socialist/anarchist views. At the same time, the draconian norms applied to his case and the consequential aftermath of his scandal-torn drama of disclosure brought matters to a spectacular head via a punishment that was to serve as a yardstick, a graphic example of the “striking of the soul and body in the name of a normative creed and a redeeming social function”.<sup>39</sup> Patently, this epoch-making watershed would have a long-lasting impact on, first of all, questions of homophobia, gender identity, and LGBT rights. There is little doubt that “[i]mages of the homosexual, whether dangerous or persecuted, coalesced around the writer’s personality and fate”,<sup>40</sup> and

<sup>38</sup> UK PARLIAMENT, “1885 Labouchere Amendment”, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/1885-labouchere-amendment/> (last accessed on 17 August 2023). The full title was “An Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes”. As one reads in the introductory gloss on the website, Section 11 “made all homosexual acts of ‘gross indecency’ illegal. The bill was primarily concerned with the protection of women and girls by increasing the age of consent and yet this small section in the Act was a pivotal change in homosexual legislation [...]. It was under this Act that Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing, among many others, were convicted and punished for committing homosexual acts”.

<sup>39</sup> L. GIOVANNELLI, “Oscar Wilde and Prison Experience”, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> M.B. KAPLAN, “Literature in the Dock: The Trials of Oscar Wilde”, *Journal of Law and Society*, 31 (1), 2004,

that Wilde's dandified, flamboyant 'camp queen' aura eventually crystallised into a more definite (and pilloried) profile. In the often cited thesis formulated by Alan Sinfield in the context of Cultural and Queer Studies, this negative *identikit* adhering to the male homosexual took shape as

the trials helped to produce a major shift in perceptions of the scope of same-sex passion. At that point, the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed.<sup>41</sup>

Again, in a statement by Joseph Bristow dating back to the same period of Sinfield's contention:

The key figure who became the most notorious victim of the Labouchere Amendment was Oscar Wilde in 1895. Not only did Wilde represent for the first time in public a celebrity who had committed sexual acts of 'gross indecency', he also came to emblemize a specific style of effeminate identity that represented a distinctly late nineteenth-century apprehension of the male homosexual [...] effeminacy became the main stigma attached to male homosexuality in the eyes of English society. So familiar is this queer stereotype that it is easy to forget that the connection between effeminate behaviour and same-sex desire was firmly established in the public imagination only after Wilde was sent to Reading Gaol for two years in solitary confinement with hard labour [...]. Only after the trials would Wilde's persona become radically refashioned as that of a pathological being: a degraded degenerate whose effeminate bearing coincided with increasingly popularized notions of the invert who, according to some sexologists, contained a woman's soul within his male body.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of his noble paean to the 'Love that dare not speak its name' (from the last line of Lord Alfred Douglas's poem "Two Loves", 1892), which drew a reverberant applause from the audience during the first criminal trial, Wilde was now being faced with a blunt obliteration of the dignified ideals of male homophilia and homosocial intimacy inspired by a Socratic/Platonic ethos and endorsed by Oxonian Hellenism. The notions of a pure and deep affection, of a spiritual and intellectual 'procreancy' that had acquired legitimacy at Victorian Oxford<sup>43</sup> were eclipsed in a court of law

p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> A. SINFIELD, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London and New York, Continuum International Publishing, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> J. BRISTOW, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885*, Buckingham, Open U.P., 1995, pp. 2, 5. Ari Adut's considerations on the reticence/exposure dynamics underlying the scandal are also worthy of note: "Wilde's well-known homosexuality did not cause a scandal until his trials simply because it was not publicly denounced. People prattled – much and maliciously, but always in private. The polluting publicity of the transgression, strict libel laws, and the high status of Wilde all educed reticence from the Victorian elite public. Those who considered themselves to be victims and who would have had legally superior evidence about Wilde's homosexuality (for instance, the families of his lovers) had reputational disincentives to take on the dramatist. They would themselves be contaminated by the resultant scandal [...] a private crusade against Wilde could also eventuate in a public contestation – a chancy proposition in the light of the tough libel laws. Finally, while Wilde was the subject of gossip within various subpublics, without a public denunciation it would be difficult to coordinate attitudes vis-à-vis the deviant dramatist within the larger Victorian public. While those with low tolerance of homosexuality would find it costly to sanction Wilde, those with higher tolerance (for instance those in the cultured milieus) would not have to at all" (A. ADUT, "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde", *American Journal of Sociology*, 111 [1], 2005, pp. 228-29).

<sup>43</sup> For an investigation of this aspect see, among others, the landmark study by L. DOWLING, *Hellenism and*

where the Wilde case came to be perceived as a ticking time-bomb putting at risk social order and the political agenda. Strenuously supported by the English middle class and the upper echelons of society, the author’s condemnation might be compared to a collective exorcism performed against ‘enervation’ and ‘degeneracy’ with a view to reintegrating a positive, healthy, and masculine discernment. It is worthwhile stressing that it was only by virtue of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, as late as the second half of the twentieth century, that male homosexuality was partially decriminalised in England and Wales (with Scotland and Northern Ireland waiting until 1980 and 1982 respectively). On the other hand, “the crime of gross indecency remained on British statute books until 2003 and Wilde was not formally pardoned of the crimes for which he was convicted until 2017”.<sup>44</sup> This happened thanks to the Alan Turing Law, so called after the brilliant mathematician and computer scientist who was prosecuted for homosexual acts in 1952 and died two years later in the wake of a chemical castration treatment. The Turing amnesty law granted a pardon to thousands of previously condemned gay men, including Wilde.

Although the pathway leading up to Wilde’s internment was partly built on tainted and scarcely corroborated evidence – or even vulnerable, coerced witnesses forswearing themselves<sup>45</sup> – a big strain seems to have been placed on legal authorities in matters of a criminal procedure that was spreading like wildfire to both working-class youth and the sociopolitical high spheres. Indeed, the guilty verdict had better be seen not so much as “a direct result of his love affair with Douglas”, but more on the grounds of Wilde’s “association with London’s rent-boys”.<sup>46</sup> Still fresh in people’s memory was in those years the Cleveland Street Affair, a male-brothel scandal which had broken out in 1889, when a house at 19 Cleveland Street, London, was raided and a gang of telegraph boys from the General Post Office were found entertaining customers belonging to the aristocracy and the top ranks of politics (with a plausible involvement of Prince Albert Victor, the grandson of Queen Victoria). In order to prevent bad publicity, the thing was hushed up, with no arrests being made and the clientele managing to cover their tracks. This sly diplomatic manoeuvre was not forgotten either, so that, in 1895, discretion and soft approaches would hardly be condoned.

Dramatically raising the spectre of a public outcry were also rumours concerning the upper reaches of the Liberal Party, with the Marquess of Queensberry sticking out again as a belligerent puppet master. Suspicions arose that the Prime Minister Archibald Primrose, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Rosebery, might have had an affair with the

*Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Ithaca and London, Cornell U.P., 1994, including its rich bibliography.

<sup>44</sup> N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 247.

<sup>45</sup> As pointed out by Joseph Bristow, Wilde “was sent to jail on the basis of testimony of felons who openly acknowledged their engagement in both the ‘gross indecency’ of which he was charged and the crime of extortion. Throughout the proceedings, these witnesses provided testimony – even if it revealed that they, too, were guilty of the crime not only of ‘gross indecency’ but also of blackmail – that remained admissible because their word supported the prosecution’s charges against Wilde [...]. The information that these confessed blackmailers disclosed in the witness box made the indictment of ‘gross indecency’ look far more culpable than the extortion they admitted to perpetrating upon Wilde and other gentlemen” (J. BRISTOW, “The Blackmailer and the Sodomite: Oscar Wilde on Trial”, *Feminist Theory*, 17 [1], 2016, p. 42).

<sup>46</sup> M. HOLLAND, “Oscar Wilde’s Crime and Punishment: Fictions, Facts and Questions”, p. 207.

marquess's eldest son, Francis Douglas, who had been Rosebery's private secretary when the latter was serving as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. In 1894, Francis had tragically passed away, officially from injuries received at a shooting party, but possibly committing suicide. Queensberry had thus "certain information about very high persons in the liberal government that would be made public unless Wilde were convicted".<sup>47</sup> In other words, the peer might well have urged the government to hasten Wilde's prosecution if they did not want the Prime Minister's alleged secret to become public knowledge.

In various ways a symbolic figure and a scapegoat, Wilde got entangled in an illegal circuit that had little to do with the ethics of liberal Hellenism and the pure ideal of Greek love. It was an unsavoury circuit that cut across social classes, age or status, dangerously giving a nod to the criminal underworld. The reconstruction of Wilde's trials would make for another long chapter, especially when one thinks of the staggering array of courtroom events and revelations, tireless cross-examinations and lack of eyewitness testimonies that characterised them, not to mention the misconceptions and loss of a part of the shorthand reports.<sup>48</sup> Even so, scholarly research has made great strides from the 1990s onwards, up to Joseph Bristow's cutting-edge contribution published in 2022.<sup>49</sup>

In a nutshell, what should be kept in mind here is that the three trials took place at the Old Bailey, London's Central Criminal Court, between April and May 1895. Wilde first appeared before the court on 3 April, testifying against the Marquess of Queensberry for libelling him a 'sodomite' in the misspelled calling card. The hazardous libel suit came to a close two days later, with the marquess's defense team submitting detailed accounts of the author's embroilment in queer circles. After Sir Edward Clarke suggested to withdraw the charge, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Wilde, who was refused bail and languished for about three weeks in Holloway jail, in the London Borough of Islington. The second trial – actually the first Crown prosecution – opened on 26 April and ended on 1 May in a hung jury, because its members did not agree on the counts. The final criminal trial started on 22 May and

<sup>47</sup> R. GAGNIER, "De Profundis as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde's Autobiography", p. 339.

<sup>48</sup> A measure of this can be inferred from the fact that "there was no authorized record printed of the proceedings or, for that matter, kept in the court records when they were transferred to the Public Record Office in 1955. Two very incomplete versions of the three trials were printed, almost certainly from the newspaper accounts: in Germany in 1896 and in Paris in 1906, before Christopher Millard published *Oscar Wilde: Three Times Tried* in 1912, also relying mainly on contemporary newspapers. For many years that remained the definitive but still abridged version, until 1948 when an enterprising lawyer, Montgomery Hyde, took Millard's version (with scant acknowledgement), and made various cosmetic changes" (M. HOLLAND, "Oscar Wilde's Crime and Punishment: Fictions, Facts and Questions", pp. 197-98).

<sup>49</sup> In addition to J. BRISTOW, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment*, New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2022, and as valuable complements to the pioneering surveys by Christopher S. Millard and H. Montgomery Hyde, see M.S. FOLDY, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society*, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1997; M. HOLLAND, *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, London, Fourth Estate, 2003; M.B. KAPLAN, "Literature in the Dock: The Trials of Oscar Wilde"; L.J. MORAN, "Transcripts and Truth: Writing the Trials of Oscar Wilde", in J. BRISTOW (ed.), *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, Athens, Ohio U.P., 2008, pp. 234-58; H. COCKS, "Wilde and the Law", in K. POWELL and P. RABY (eds), *Oscar Wilde in Context*, Cambridge, CUP, 2013, pp. 297-304.

closed on 25 May, with a conviction for gross indecency carrying a maximum sentence. Lord Alfred Douglas’s public appeals, as well as the petition to the Home Secretary drafted by More Adey with George Bernard Shaw’s support, remained unheard and, similarly to Wilde’s lengthy 1896 Clemency Petition, would fail to secure an early release.

4. In the time span extending from 25 May 1895 to 19 May 1897, Wilde served his sentence in three different institutions: Pentonville, a government penitentiary in the north of Greater London (from May to June 1895); Wandsworth, in south London (from July to mid-November 1895); and Reading, a local jail for less serious offenders in South East England (from 20 November 1895 to the day before his release in 1897). It is a familiar observation that, within days of Wilde’s arrival at Pentonville – a detention centre where the protocols of solitary confinement and silent isolation had been rigorously applied since the 1840s – warning news circulated in the press about his deteriorating physical and mental condition. To be sure, bad reports of a similar kind had been worrying government officials for at least a year, causing concern about the rules and regulations in force. In 1894, the *Daily Chronicle* – a best-selling newspaper based in London and aligned with the Liberal Party – had fostered the cause of prison reform by publishing a series of unsigned articles where Reverend William Morrison (assistant chaplain at Wandsworth), H.W. Massingham and trade unionist John Burns had put readers on guard on the escalation of cases of insanity and suicide among convicts. Other newspapers, such as the *Fortnightly Review*, *Truth* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, added fuel to the fire.

These widely publicised allegations shone a spotlight into the prison system itself, whose ‘Hard labour, hard fare, and hard board’ rallying cry encapsulated the principles of an iron-fist policy revolving around retributive justice and deterrence. Untouched by questions of sympathy and restorative practice, Victorian Britain’s penal laws were committed to imposing sanctions and pinning down culpable behaviours, giving little consideration to potentially mitigating circumstances or outside factors. Offenders were bound to ride on the discipline-and-punish highway, being denied human dignity and with their needs reduced to a bare minimum, almost below subsistence level. Funnily enough, although the declared objective was to train lawbreakers in obedience and self-control and rehabilitate them for a reentry, the stigmatisation process risked producing the reverse effect. Owing to the lack of effective reintegration programs, crime and recidivism rates tended to fester.

When Wilde was incarcerated, jails were run in accordance with two main pieces of legislation, both championing tough-on-crime policies designed to break the spirit and mortify even the coarsest of miscreants. One was the Prison Act 1865, which defined hard labour and formalised the institution of separate cellular confinement, mandating that every inmate be locked in a single cell, except for one hour of physical activity per day in the prison yard. Whether in the cell – where each of them was to concentrate on hard-labour duties – or in the yard, they were forbidden to talk, the only possible verbal contact being with prison officials. Such a penalisation of speech powerfully added to the absence of human contact and companionship. Indeed, the

so-called 'silent system' was "thought to be a vehicle whereby convicts' wills were broken by being kept in total silence and by long, pointless hard labour".<sup>50</sup> From the point of view of the staunch upholders of this decalogue, any 'promiscuous mingling' and 'contaminating influences' between hardened outlaws and first offenders would thus be hindered. Above all, solitude and the preclusion of intercourse were conceived as a lesson of admonition and an ideal predicament setting the scene for examinations of conscience, the probing of one's misdeeds, repentance, and prayer (a ritualistic moment that was strengthened through mandatory Christian worship). It was not for nothing that prison libraries basically consisted of copies of the Bible, prayer-books, and other religious works.

The other piece of legislation was the Prison Act 1877, which implemented a uniform disciplinary code by nationalising prisons. Administrative power was transferred from local authorities to the government under the Home Secretary and an appointed Board of Prison Commissioners. Therefore, in a twin move, the separate system and the ban on verbal interchanges were institutionalised on the national territory.<sup>51</sup> Coming as a package were a panopticon-like monitoring and a pitiless daily routine within cold, dank and smelly cells, with long amounts of time allotted to heavy tasks. Dirt, chronic hunger and insomnia were the order of the day. If the unvarying prison diet was poor and unpalatable, for the first thirty days of his/her sentence, an inmate would be allowed no mattress but only a hard pillow of coarse sack, an old blanket and a plank bed, which made it extremely difficult to sleep and caused pains in one's bones.

Wilde was to bear much of this burden, from the unhealthy food to an enforced-labour timetable, from the isolation in a dreary cell to the impossibility to communicate (the silence rule, together with the wake-up call in the early morning and the scrupulous cleaning of the cell, were tricky terrain to him). As soon as he set foot in HMP Pentonville, he

encountered the general régime that, with the exception of type of labor, would reflect little change during the next two years [...] 6 a.m. clean cell; 7, porridge and brown bread; exercise for an hour, oakum pick-

<sup>50</sup> N.R. STOREY, *Prisons & Prisoners in Victorian Britain*, Stroud, Gloucestershire, The History Press, 2010, p. 13. As Philip Priestley also underlines, the "only communication officially allowed to convicts undergoing penal servitude was via visits and letters. Both channels were subject to conditions which greatly reduced their usefulness to anyone genuinely seeking to keep alive an emotional attachment to someone outside [...]. 'During the first two years letters are allowed to pass between prisoners and their families, and also visits to take place every six months, the second year every four months, and after that every three months, provided always that a prisoner did not forfeit his privilege by misconduct, and that he earned his proper quota of marks'" (P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 198).

<sup>51</sup> The 1877 Act "transferred direct control of the local prisons to central government", and one could "see the creation of a centralized prison administration in England and Wales as the handiwork of Major-General Sir Joshua Jebb and Major-General Sir Edmund DuCane. Both were soldiers, both were engineers, and both were vigorous penal administrators [...]. A truly English compromise permitted the emergence in time of a regime which incorporated elements of both systems: separation *and* silent association. Under the later superintendence of Sir Edmund DuCane, the essentially moral purposes of both systems were discarded. Lip-service continued to be paid to the idea of reform, but its external forms were redirected towards ends of punishment and deterrence; towards the creation of a system of 'salutary terror'" (P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, p. 6). These policies rested "on purely punitive grounds" and the "formulation of pseudo-medical remedies for crime" (*ibidem*, p. 37).

ing until noon; dinner of bacon, beans, bread, potatoes (cold meat once a week); 12:30-6 oakum picking; tea or gruel and 8 ounces bread; 7 p.m. lights out. No personal possessions were allowed in the cell, which included only a plank bed, blanket, hard pillow and small table. Each morning on pain of punishment the prisoner would arrange these items symmetrically for inspection. (After his release, Wilde’s friends noticed that he was incapable of allowing common objects to rest without comparable ordering.) One letter could be sent and received per quarter, but letters were allowed for the “purpose of enabling [prisoners] to keep up a connection with their respectable friends and not that they may be kept informed of public events.” No books were allowed the first month, during the second and third only a Bible, prayer-book, and hymnbook. Afterwards, one book a week from the prison library was permitted.<sup>52</sup>

During the first few weeks, Wilde spent roughly six hours a day climbing the ‘everlasting staircase’ of the treadmill, which was one of the mainstays of punitive labour, a cog in the drab machine of a pointless toil that did not provide any industrial training, nor teach trades that might open the door to a post-release employment. Also called the ‘treadmill’, this appliance was designed by civil engineer Sir William Cubitt and first installed in the 1810s (originally with the productive purpose of driving mill stones for grinding corn or pumping water). It consisted of a large hollow cylinder with an iron frame and a series of wooden steps built around it. The big wheel started rotating as the convicts – each of them positioned in a separate compartment made of wood – pushed with their feet on the planks so as to climb the steps, not rarely tripping up and getting their limbs caught in (or even dying due to heart attacks or collapsed lungs).<sup>53</sup>

Another infernal device that plagued the correctional population, including Wilde, was the wearisome crank, a machine located in the cell and targeted for turning paddles in a box of sand. Its working depended on the force exerted by the prisoner, who was expected to turn as much as twenty revolutions a minute, up to 10,000 revolutions in eight and a half hours. Other cumbersome tasks were mailbag sewing and oakum picking. Consonant with the precept of keeping “unskilled hands from idleness”,<sup>54</sup> the preparation of oakum (generally three pounds per day) boiled down to separating strands of old tarred ropes, which had to be pulled apart in order to make them as fine as silk for shipbuilding use (although the demand for oakum declined when iron replaced wood in the construction of ships). This tedious assignment caused greasy blackened fingers and blisters on hands.

If, as soon as June 1895, Wilde was released from the treadmill to be transferred to Wandsworth, regrettably in this second penitentiary he did not fare better. Due to

<sup>52</sup> R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis as Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography*”, p. 340.

<sup>53</sup> More specifically, “each wheel contained twenty-four steps set eight inches apart, so the circumference of the cylinder was 16ft. The wheel, under the power of the convicts walking up its ‘steps’, revolved twice in a minute with a mechanism set to ring a bell on every thirtieth revolution to announce the spell of work was finished. Every man put to labour at the wheel worked fifteen quarter-hour sessions, climbing up to 18,000ft every day” (P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, p. 71). Furthermore, with reference to the partitions: “[T]he design of the prisoners’ treadmill changed slightly with the installation of panels to separate the prisoners (resembling a voting booth) so that they could not talk to one another, that they might contemplate their crimes in bare isolation and without distraction. The exercise became one that was about psychology and the exertion of absolute institutional power over the prisoner” (V.C. REID, “Running Wilde: Landscape, the Body, and the History of the Treadmill”, *Critical Survey*, 24 [3], 2012, p. 82).

<sup>54</sup> P. PRIESTLEY, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1830-1914*, p. 123.

a physical and psychological collapse, he continued to lose weight and, as already said, was hospitalised for two months. He would then serve the longer part of his sentence (one year and a half) at Reading, a secluded regional prison in Berkshire, presumably safer from the prying eyes of the press. During the first nine months there, he was not spared the ills of the silent and isolation regime, even being temporarily put on bread and water. Subsequently, though, he would enjoy a relaxation of the rules and the granting of some privileges via the intermediation of friends as well as administrative and political authorities, in a turning of the tide that did much “to generate momentum for penal reform”.<sup>55</sup>

It was again in June 1895 that Wilde was visited in his cell by Richard Burdon Haldane, a Liberal statesman, lawyer and member of a commission that was investigating on British jails’ conditions and bureaucracy. Aided by Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise – just appointed new Chairman of Prison Commissioners by the Home Secretary H.H. Asquith, and who is duly remembered today as the founder of the Borstal system – Haldane had Wilde relocated from Pentonville to Wandsworth and would arrange for him to obtain access to a selection of outside books and some stationery items.

Both Ruggles-Brise and Haldane were part of the Gladstone Committee, an investigative body set up by Asquith and chaired by Herbert John Gladstone, the undersecretary at the Home Office, with the purpose of inquiring into and writing a report on the treatment of prisoners in British penitentiaries. The 1895 Gladstone Report expressed concern about the serious flaws in the coeval administration’s management and provided recommendations by dint of twenty-five proposals for change that reflected the New Liberalism spirit, a “sincere attempt to design a prison system concentrating upon the reformation of the individual and a greater understanding of character typology and specific needs”. Indeed, this document “remained the definitive statement on penal policy for much of the first half of the twentieth century”.<sup>56</sup> Imbued with a reform-conscious ethos, it voiced criticism of an apparently state-produced torture whose consequences proved deleterious and irreversible, particularly on mentally unstable inmates and first offenders. In contrast with such a crime-fighting line, the report encouraged flexible and constructive policies envisioning the individual’s reinstatement in civic life. One of its premises was that the system should help convicts to develop moral instincts and become better men and women than when they went in. In order to do so, each person had to be seen as virtually reclaimable. Among the recommendations were the lifting of the ban on talking, the promotion of collective labour, education, and the creation of Prisoners’ Aid and Rehabilitation Societies.

No wonder that, upon the Gladstone Report’s publication and with a growing pressure to take forward a revolutionary agenda on penal environment, a very small margin was left for Sir Edmund Frederick Du Cane to hold his position as Chairman of Prison Commissioners. A Major-General of the Royal Engineers, Du Cane had been

<sup>55</sup> M. HOUSDEN, “Oscar Wilde’s Imprisonment and an Early Idea of ‘Banal Evil’”, p. 4. Housden further comments: “Indeed Wilde attracted a series of celebrity visitors. Through his experiences influential people normally insulated from unsavoury spheres of life were exposed to the dire conditions behind bars. As a result, the prison establishment was forced to consider its position very carefully indeed” (*ibidem*).

<sup>56</sup> N.R. STOREY, *Prisons & Prisoners in Victorian Britain*, p. 17.

a Surveyor-General of prisons and Inspector of military guardhouses and colonial convict jails, and had also played a pivotal role in strengthening government control by closing down local or sub-standard detention centres and reducing maintenance costs in view of the Prison Act 1877. Yet, his stiff personality and unyielding traits were now perceived as eerily out-of-date and, in March 1895, he was cajoled into resigning his post in favour of Ruggles-Brise, who was of course heedful of the Gladstone Committee’s counsel.

By a twist of fate, all this happened in a matter of weeks before judgment was passed on Wilde. Despite that, in yet another capricious turning of the wheel that was to shape the author’s destiny, the suggested reforms, due to a change of government, would go into effect only three years later. One had in fact to wait for the Prison Act 1898, i.e. the year following Wilde’s release, to witness the adoption of enlightened canons finally sealing “the abolition of unproductive labour in prisons”, including the crank and treadmill, and stipulating that “prisoners were to work together, learn trades and have a greater access to books”.<sup>57</sup> Total isolation might not now be imposed for periods longer than one month and offenders between 16 and 21 years of age were to be hosted in state reformatories, instead of being subjected to the harsh treatment administered to adults.

However, it was no small thing that when, in 1898, the long-overdue Prison Reform Bill was being debated in Parliament, some members mentioned the poignant testimonial value of C.3.3.’s *Ballad of Reading Gaol* before the House of Commons. All in all, one can state that Wilde was indissolubly bonded to this extraordinary train of events and that his case history contributed to providing the impetus for a momentous change toward prison reform and restorative justice. Even his *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis* would not have existed if, in correspondence with the Du Cane/Ruggles-Brise succession, sympathetic Major James O. Nelson had not replaced tyrannical Lieutenant-Colonel Henry B. Isaacson as the new Governor of Reading Prison. When he took over, in the summer of 1896 and under the auspices of Ruggles-Brise, Nelson started bending the rules via acts of humane consideration. He lifted restrictions on Wilde’s use of paper, ink and reading material as well as on schedules and the frequency with which he might write “to his friends outside, sometimes with instructions for them to write back under cover” to Nelson himself.<sup>58</sup> The latter “quickly understood the psychological and emotional necessity of allowing Wilde to write, over a period of many months, to the man whom he blamed for his personal downfall, his lover Douglas”.<sup>59</sup> It was again thanks to this governor that, in May 1897, the complete manuscript of the *Epistola* was returned to Wilde, who would further praise the man’s ‘noble kindness’ by sending him inscribed copies of both *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (in February 1898) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (in February 1899).

Besides expressing his deep gratitude to Nelson, speaking of him as “the most

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 222.

<sup>59</sup> N. FRANKEL, “Introduction”, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 9.

Christ-like man I ever met” and “my good and kind friend”,<sup>60</sup> Wilde eulogised other commendable exceptions to a generally appalling context. Among them was Thomas Martin, an altruistic and generous Irish warder who was dismissed from service at Reading because he dared give some sweet biscuits to a tiny child crying with hunger. Along with other two, this child could not afford to pay a fine and was therefore convicted for stealing rabbits.<sup>61</sup> The publication of Martin’s letter in the *Daily Chronicle* on 24 May 1897, in which the fired junior warder told his sad story, was instrumental in stimulating Wilde to pen the first of his two campaigning letters to the same newspaper. He thus seized the opportunity to make official remarks about prison life in an effort to expose its cruelties and promote an urgent, systemic change.

Well-aware of the potential of his statements for orientating parliamentary inquiry and accelerating reform, Wilde took his stand in what at this stage could not be a totally losing battle. The first blow he dealt consisted in a circumstantial letter to the *Daily Chronicle* written within days of his release, on 27 May 1897, and published on 28 May. Fittingly titled “The Case of Warder Martin”, it subsequently came out in pamphlet form as *Children in Prison and Other Cruelties of Prison Life* (London, Murdoch, ca. 1898), continuing to fuel a debate covered by the press and on the floor of Parliament.<sup>62</sup> In this cogent document, Wilde’s claims are infused with the charisma of first-hand experience and pungent rhetorical force. The author sets out to share his genuine feelings of consternation in the face of a sort of legalised horror that had deleterious effects at various levels. The first thorny issue that he takes pains to highlight regards the abusive treatment of children, beginning with the tragically icastic episode of the three starving little robbers mentioned above and then looking at a wider picture connected with the hundreds of children and youths routinely locked up in British adult jails.

At the same time, Wilde is wary of going off at abstract tangents, and offers instead a concise overview that makes his reflections sound as a trustworthy witness account. In other words, he sticks to the point and often underscores the fact that he personally *saw* what he is describing and that his emotional involvement is authentic and justified. Hence his stressing that the cruelty “practised by day and night on children in English prisons is incredible, except to those that have witnessed it and are aware of the

<sup>60</sup> Quoted *ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Wilde seems to have contacted Martin on the sly, offering to pay the fine himself. Frankel observes that Martin and Wilde “surreptitiously exchanged friendly notes, written on stray scraps of paper, and Martin broke prison rules and ran great risks so that Wilde and his fellow prisoners might be provided with a modicum of comfort. Martin supplied Wilde with contraband copies of the *Daily Chronicle* and the weekly reviews, for instance, as well as ginger biscuits” (N. FRANKEL, Note to O. WILDE, “Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*”, 27 May 1897, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 292).

<sup>62</sup> Noticeably, he signed this letter “‘Oscar Wilde’, determined to harness his name and fame to the cause of prison reform. But it was a rare public use of his birth name post-release, and the last time in his life that he signed a publication of any kind with this name” (N. FRANKEL, *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*, p. 229). As Regenia Gagnier reminds us, “Wilde’s association with the prison did not end when he left it: he corresponded after release with inmates, prison administration, and reformers like Michael Davitt and wrote articles describing prison conditions to the *Daily Chronicle*. He read the debates on penal reform while he was still imprisoned and experienced at first hand the demise of the official penal philosophy of deterrence” (R. GAGNIER, “*De Profundis* as *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis: A Materialist Reading of Oscar Wilde’s Autobiography*”, p. 336).

brutality of the system”.<sup>63</sup> Such a ‘regimentation’ of callousness and stringent rules would indeed border on stupidity and blindness to common sense. And, strange as it may seem, this could have little or nothing to do with upstream ‘good intentions’. The real false step is to be found in the fallacious assumption that “because a thing is the rule it is right”.<sup>64</sup> In a mixture of humanitarian afflatus and psychological understanding, Wilde also calls for a prompt intervention by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a body established in 1889 and obtaining a Royal Charter in 1895, as well as for proper dormitories, physical activities, and the organisation of workshops. The following excerpt gives us a flavour of his indictment:

The present treatment of children is terrible, primarily from people not understanding the peculiar psychology of a child’s nature. A child can understand a punishment inflicted by an individual, such as a parent or guardian, and bear it with a certain amount of acquiescence. What it cannot understand is a punishment inflicted by society. It cannot realise what society is. With grown people it is, of course, the reverse [...]. The child consequently, being taken away from its parents by people whom it has never seen, and of whom it knows nothing, and finding itself in a lonely and unfamiliar cell, waited on by strange faces, and ordered about and punished by the representatives of a system that it cannot understand, becomes an immediate prey to the first and most prominent emotion produced by modern prison life – the emotion of terror. The terror of a child in prison is quite limitless [...]. The inhuman treatment of a child is always inhuman, by whomsoever it is inflicted. But inhuman treatment by society is to the child the more terrible because there is no appeal [...]. The second thing from which a child suffers in prison is hunger [...]. A child who has been crying all day long, and perhaps half the night, in a lonely dimly-lit cell, and is preyed upon by terror, simply cannot eat food of this coarse, horrible kind [...]. Of course no child under fourteen years of age should be sent to prison at all [...]. If, however, they are to be sent to prison, during the daytime they should be in a workshop or schoolroom with a warder. At night they should sleep in a dormitory, with a night-warder to look after them. They should be allowed exercise for at least three hours a day.<sup>65</sup>

In this 1897 letter, Wilde resolutely discredits a system targeted at crashing inmates of all ages through an internment of twenty-three hours out of twenty-four, and also does not refrain from denouncing the badness of sanitary arrangements (especially latrines in cells). The writer’s mental dexterity and celebrated art of paradox eventually shine in the adamant assertion italicised below, and echoed in the first part of the present paper’s title:

[T]he only really humanising influence in prison is the influence of the prisoners. Their cheerfulness under terrible circumstances, their sympathy for each other, their humility, their gentleness, their pleasant smiles of greeting when they meet each other, their complete acquiescence in their punishments, are all quite wonderful, and I myself learned many sound lessons from them [...]. *It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons.*<sup>66</sup>

If the last clause should speak for itself by now, it is again worth emphasising Wilde’s contemplation of and empathy with a population of outcasts – many of them nonviolent and detained for petty offences – with whom he had formed social bonds. As Peter

<sup>63</sup> O. WILDE, “Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*”, 27 May 1897, in ID., *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 293.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 297.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 297-305.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 305 (emphasis added).

Stoneley contends in his pioneering archival research among Reading Prison's Registers, "[s]eeing them, and seeing that they were as unhappy as he was, made him feel pity, and it was this that broke his obsession with his own fate". Wilde "demonstrated a friendly and sympathetic awareness of the other prisoners, and acknowledged a debt to them",<sup>67</sup> somewhat experiencing a 'therapeutic epiphany' capable of warding off suicide drives.

In addition to children – among whom no one under 14 years of age should be placed behind bars – the author identifies another category at risk, i.e. the mentally weak or sick, or those who degenerate when in prison. Wilde focuses on one specific case he came upon, namely James Edward Prince, a young soldier serving a six-month sentence and behaving like a half-witted man, constantly crying, grinning, hysterically laughing to himself or gesticulating in a grotesque manner. Although he was being watched day and night by warders, Prince continued to be punished for disobedience, typically through flogging. To all appearances, except for the Medical Commissioners, he was becoming insane, so much so that the Irish nationalist and MP Michael Davitt would discuss this controversial instance in Parliament. For his part, Wilde provokingly addresses the *Daily Chronicle's* editor in stark terms: "May I ask you to use your influence to have this case examined into, and to see that the lunatic prisoner is properly treated?".<sup>68</sup>

Symbolically enough, the letter closes with a last cry against the stupidity of the system, but it also lets in a ray of hope by referring to the changing of the guard at Reading, when, in July 1896, the warm civility of Nelson had begun to wipe out Isaacson's dogged harshness. Almost a year elapsed between this contribution and Wilde's second letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, dated 23 March 1898 and published on 24 March under the teasing headline "Don't Read This If You Want to Be Happy Today" and with the signature "The Author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*". This allusive self-reference "carried considerable weight at the time of publication and also hinted at Wilde's brief rebirth as a prominent literary figure in his own lifetime",<sup>69</sup> with the poem breaking a record of sales at just six weeks from its distribution. Riding the wave of a (temporarily) regained notoriety, and with the once gaping wound of his personal ordeal now on the mend, Wilde drew up a shorter and yet no less acerbic piece. Importantly, its appearance in the press coincided with the day the second reading of the 1898 Prisons Bill was being debated in the House of Commons.

Here, Wilde returned to the attack with an *exposé* aiming to foster support for change and to impact on parliamentary negotiations. History would prove him right, with the soon-to-be Prison Act 1898 chiming in with various of the amendments he had strongly encouraged. The question of urgent reforms is raised in the very opening paragraph of the letter, lashing out at "our present stupid and barbarous system".<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> P. STONELEY, "Looking at the Others': Oscar Wilde and the Reading Gaol Archive", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19 (4), 2014, p. 457. Interestingly, Stoneley identifies about ten inmates with whom Wilde forged a link, corresponded or even helped financially when he was in exile. See *ibidem*, pp. 474-77.

<sup>68</sup> O. WILDE, "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 27 May 1897, p. 311.

<sup>69</sup> N. FRANKEL, Note to O. WILDE, "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 23 March 1898, in *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*, p. 382.

<sup>70</sup> O. WILDE, "Letter to the *Daily Chronicle*", 23 March 1898, in ID., *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar*

This system’s bureaucratic body and team of officers (inspectors, justices of the peace, doctors, chaplains, and so forth) are said to be the ones that should be re-orientated in the first place, starting from their supine bowing to discipline and rules. In fact, “what is cruel and ignorant is this very code of regulations”,<sup>71</sup> which, when carried out, risk making the situation worse.

Wilde asserts that the only way to break the vicious circle is to swiftly introduce a series of high-priority reforms concerning two types of needs: the demands of the body and those of the mind. The former are associated with hunger, insomnia (owing to plank beds) and disease, three evils thriving in the foul air and unwholesome environment of the detention house, where food is insufficient, disgusting and repeatedly causing diarrhoea. As for the needs of the mind, they are not far to seek either, to the point that

[t]he present prison system seems almost to have for its aim the wrecking and the destruction of the mental faculties. The production of insanity is, if not its object, certainly its result [...]. Deprived of books, of all human intercourse, isolated from every humane and humanising influence, condemned to eternal silence, robbed of all intercourse with the external world, treated like an unintelligent animal, brutalised below the level of any of the brute creation, the wretched man who is confined in an English prison can hardly escape becoming insane.<sup>72</sup>

Not wishing to dwell longer on such horrors or sound too sentimental, Wilde soon switches to what must be done, from the possibility for every prisoner to get an adequate, well-chosen supply of books (more than just one a week) to being allowed to see his/her friends and relatives once a month, for a reasonable time and in a proper room (instead of for twenty minutes, four times a year, in separate iron cages or wooden boxes). Every detainee should be permitted to write and receive a letter at least once a month (as opposed to four times a year). The protocol enabling to censor a prisoner’s correspondence ought to be set aside, too. Crucially, penitentiaries should be equipped with a team of full-time (and less ignorant) doctors, who might really be up to their task and mission.

This final remark is loaded with vitriolic overtones, reverberating in the letter’s epilogue like a taunting apophthegm: “But to make even these reforms effectual, much has to be done. And the first, and perhaps the most difficult task is to humanise the governors of prisons, to civilise the warders, and to Christianise the chaplains”.<sup>73</sup> In true Wildean style, a memorable, bittersweet witticism can thus be seen as ultimately holding up a mirror to British society’s ‘notables’, such as administrators and clergymen, politicians and legislators. In an awareness-raising effort, Wilde looked forward to a moral (re)assessment of all actors and a debunking of received ideas, from the alleged brutality of convicts to the righteousness of establishment authorities. And it is surely no coincidence that the author embraced responsibility and dialectically entered the field of civic engagement by way of a startling reversal of perspectives.

Wilde, p. 373.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 379.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 383.

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